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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 001337

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [BG](#)  
SUBJECT: ELECTION IN NORTHEASTERN BANGLADESH: REFORMERS,  
RENEGADES AND REBELS

REF: A. DHAKA 1298  
[1](#)B. DHAKA 1304

Classified By: Ambassador James Moriarty, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

#### SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) As Bangladesh's parliamentary election campaigns swing into high gear, the contests in Sylhet Division in northeastern Bangladesh reflect national-level issues, including debates within the political parties and alliances. Heavyweights from the two leading parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), face each other in the division's main constituency, Sylhet-1. Contests in Moulvibazaar and Habiganj that include both AL and Jatiya Party candidates reflect SheiQ Hasina's "buyer's remorse" regarding the alliance between her AwamiQeague and the Jatiya Party. In Moulvibazaar and Sunamganj, two locally popular candidates, who previously represented the BNP alliance but whom the BNP denied nominations in this campaign, are running as independents. The candidates in Sylhet division pay lip service to issues like inflation, peace and security, governance and energy needs; in reality, however, personality dominates the individual campaigns, just as the national contest pits the two former Prime Ministers, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, against each other.

#### SYLHET-1: TIGHT RACE IN A BELLWETHER CONSTITUENCY

[1](#)2. (C) EmbOffs traveled December 15-19 through Sylhet Division, which includes four districts in northeastern Bangladesh: Sylhet, Moulvibazaar, Sunamganj, and Habiganj. Two former finance ministers are facing off in the division's key race in Sylhet City (Sylhet-1). Sylhet-1 is a bellwether constituency, having voted in each Parliamentary election since 1991 for the winning party's candidate. M. Saifur Rahman represents the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and A.M.A. Muhith represents the Awami League (AL). The two faced each other in the the last parliamentary election in 2001, when Saifur Rahman beat Muhith soundly. Saifur Rahman remains strong in Sylhet, despite corruption allegations surrounding him and his family and despite the fact that he led, albeit reluctantly, a breakaway "reformist" faction of the BNP during Begum Khaleda Zia's imprisonment in 2007-2008. Many were surprised the BNP gave Saifur Rahman the nod to run in this election, as the party leadership has punished many BNP reformers by denying them nominations (Ref A).

[1](#)3. (C) Muhith, Saifur Rahman's Awami League rival, is a former bureaucrat turned politician who many believe Sheikh

Hasina would name Finance Minister should the Awami League win on December 29. Muhith played a key role in developing the Awami League's election manifesto, and of all the candidates we met in Sylhet, could speak the most knowledgeably and eloquently about the challenges facing Bangladesh and the Awami League's plan to address them. Muhith hails from an old Sylhet family with a reputation for honesty. That said, Muhith lacks the skill of a politician, particularly when it comes to relating to the average voter. A conversation with the guard employed to man the family compound's entrance gate reflects this. Even though Muhith was his employer, the guard told us he would not vote for him because Muhith was not "friendly."

#### DISCORD IN THE AWAMI LEAGUE-JATIYA PARTY ALLIANCE

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14. (C) We have heard in Dhaka that Sheikh Hasina is dissatisfied with the alliance she forged with the Jatiya Party led by former President H.M. Ershad (Ref B). This dissatisfaction is playing out in two Sylhet division constituencies, Moulvibazaar-2 and Habiganj-2, where Awami League candidates are campaigning despite the fact that they are not the "official" alliance nominees. In Moulvibazaar-2, the Election Commission rejected the nomination of the Awami League's Ataur Rahman Shamim because of financial irregularities. Therefore, the Awami League and Jatiya Party agreed Jatiya's candidate would represent the alliance in Moulvibazaar-2. When the courts overturned the Election Commission's decision regarding Shamim, he announced he would campaign, including against Ali Abbas Khan, the Jatiya

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candidate. Khan, the Jatiya Party and some locally prominent AL leaders claimed Shamim is a renegade candidate, but the Awami League's central leadership has not yet told Shamim to stand down. The conflict between Khan and Shamim has led to reports of clashes between the two candidates' supporters.

15. (C) Similarly, the Awami League and Jatiya Party reportedly agreed that Jatiya candidate Abid Ali Chowdhury would represent the alliance in Habiganj-2. However, Awami League candidate Abdul Mazid Khan maintained he was the true alliance candidate. He said he would continue to campaign since he had not received any instruction from the central Awami League leadership to withdraw from the contest.

#### BNP REBEL CANDIDATES

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16. (C) Sylhet division is also home to at least two BNP "rebel" candidates. In Moulvibazaar and Sunamganj, two candidates who previously had ties to or represented the BNP are running as independent candidates, after the BNP leadership rejected them as BNP candidates. One is M.M. Shahin of Moulvibazaar-2, who was elected to Parliament in 2001 as an independent candidate and later allied himself with the then-BNP government. Shahin said he had hoped to run as a BNP candidate in this election, but for "unknown" reasons, BNP leaders rejected his nomination. Shahin, who lived in the United States for many years and owns the largest-circulation Bangla-language newspaper in North America, was confident he would be re-elected as an independent. He reportedly has made overtures to the Awami League, in addition to the BNP, in an attempt to ensure himself a strong position regardless of which party wins nation-wide on December 29. The dispute between the Awami League and Jatiya candidates and problems surrounding the BNP candidate in Moulvibazaar-2 indicate Shahin could end up on top.

17. (C) BNP leaders refused a nomination to long-time BNP MP Nasir Hossain in Sunamganj. As a result, Hossain is running as an independent in two Sunamganj constituencies. (NOTE: If

Hossain were to win in both constituencies, he would have to give up one. A by-election would be held later in the constituency he relinquished. END NOTE.) Hossain admitted the BNP leadership rejected his candidacy because he joined the "reformist" movement during Begum Zia's recent imprisonment. He defended his decision to support reform within the BNP, voicing his belief that Bangladesh must deal strongly with its political corruption. Hossain expressed confidence that he could be elected as an independent, noting he had built the BNP network in Sunamganj and many BNP supporters had come over to his campaign as a result.

18. (C) Even among the recognized BNP candidates there is discord. In Sylhet, civil society contacts reported friction between M. Saifur Rahman, the BNP candidate in Sylhet-1, and Ilyas Ali, the BNP candidate in Sylhet-2. Ali, a thuggish individual whose office boasts a large photo of himself with Begum Zia's ultra-corrupt son, Tarique Rahman, reportedly has his constituency sewn up based on the intimidating presence of numerous campaign workers. Some local observers told us Ali's hold on the BNP network in Sylhet and the discord between Ali and Saifur Rahman could hurt Saifur Rahman's campaign in Sylhet-1 and benefit his opponent, Muhith.

#### ROLE OF NON-RESIDENT BANGLADESHIS

19. (C) Most Bangladeshis working overseas hail from Sylhet, and the influence of wealthy non-resident Bangladeshis is apparent in the election campaigns. Many of the candidates themselves have returned to Bangladesh to get involved in politics. Some, like M.M. Shahin in Moulvibazaar, have been back in Bangladesh for awhile or divide their time between Bangladesh and their overseas residence. Others are newly returned and looking to break in to politics, which has caused some resentment amongst their local opponents. For example, Awami League leaders in Sylhet-2 hoped to run a local candidate against the BNP's Ilyas Ali. However, the central Awami League leadership chose a newly-returned Bangladeshi as the party's candidate over the local favorite, reportedly because the non-resident Bangladeshi funded Sheikh Hasina's armored car.

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110. (C) Even if they are not running for office, non-resident Bangladeshis are returning in droves to support the candidate or party of their choice. Most candidates with whom we met had sons, brothers or nephews who were home, usually from the United States or the United Kingdom, to support family campaigns. These overseas-based Bangladeshis have brought their checkbooks with them; one media account noted that AL candidate A.M.A. Muhith was relying on the deep pockets of his large family, some of whom live in the United States, to help fund his campaign in Sylhet-1.

#### COMMENT

111. (C) As with the contest between Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina, most of the races in Sylhet Division are based on personality not issues. The candidates in northeastern Bangladesh paid lip service to "controlling prices," law and order and local development issues, but could not provide specifics on how to achieve these objectives. Saifur Rahman and Muhith were the most articulate of the lot. At the other end of the scale was Ilyas Ali, who merely regurgitated Begum Zia's strong rhetoric against the current Caretaker Government and the Awami League. Former BNP candidates running as independents appeared confident their supporters would chose personality over party. And the Awami League does not appear concerned that running its candidates against Jatiya Party alliance partners in at least 14 constituencies nation-wide might split the AL-Jatiya alliance vote in favor

of the BNP.

MORIARTY